

07/20/21 Tuesday

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Plane Used by Guaido's Negotiating Team for Barbados Talks Also Carried Moïse's Assassins - Report
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

When news broke that Haitian President Jovenel Moïse had been killed by a hit squad, analysts quickly drew parallels to the 2020 "Bay of Piglets" attempt to kidnap Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by hired mercenaries, and revelations by Haitian police that many of the accused men hailed from Colombia only hardened those suspicions.

According to a report by Venezuelan television network [La Iguana](#), the same private jet used to transport some of the hit squad that killed Haitian President Jovenel Moïse earlier this month was also used to transport Venezuelan self-declared interim president Juan Guaido to negotiations.

The aircraft in question is a Cessna Citation Mustang four-seater small business jet with the tail number HI949. Back on May 15, 2020, when the aircraft took off from Maquietta, Venezuela, the aircraft tracking service AeroNoticiasVE noted on Twitter that the same aircraft had transported Guaido's team to Barbados in September 2019 for [peace talks](#) with representatives from the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, who Guaido has attempted to overthrow. This aircraft, it was reported, also transported three alleged members of the commando unit that shot to death Moïse and injured his wife, Martine, early on the morning of July 7 in their home on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. One of them was allegedly Christian Emmanuel Sanon, who Haitian National Police (PNH) have said was the mastermind behind the assassination plot. The aircraft is owned by Helidosa, an airline in the Dominican Republic. CEO Alex Castillo said in a statement obtained by [Haiti Libre](#) that the three passengers "passed all the immigration controls in the airports by which they left and entered and that his company had no means of establishing that those who used his services had criminal ends," according to the outlet.

"We are not a security agency, or an investigative agency to be able to know it," Castillo said. He revealed that his airline was also responsible for transporting [Martine Moïse](#) to Florida for treatment after the attack, as well as for transporting former Haitian President [Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#) to Cuba last month for emergency COVID-19 treatment. He noted the company has 15 planes and 24 helicopters.

However, this isn't the first connection between the assassination plot and the Venezuelan opposition: Venezuelan National Assembly Speaker Jorge Rodriguez said last week that CTU Security, the mercenary group allegedly contracted for the hit job, was also [behind the 2018 attempt](#) to assassinate Maduro with exploding drones during a speech. He added that it was also connected to the 2020 attempt [by Silvercorp mercenaries](#) from the US to kidnap Maduro, which was paid for by Guaido's US-backed ersatz government.

The PNH says they have arrested 20 men connected to the assassination plot, 18 of whom are Colombian and two of whom are Americans. Many of the Colombians have been confirmed to

be former military personnel, [some of whom](#) received training from the US military as part of their service, while one of the Americans was a former informant for the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), a federal police agency that also works extensively in Colombia.

On Monday, Claude Joseph, the former acting prime minister who was nonetheless recognized as the de facto leader of Haiti by the United Nations and the US after Moïse's killing, announced he [would step aside](#) in favor of Ariel Henry, who Moïse appointed to replace Joseph just a day before the assassination. Thus, the new government will have a prime minister, but no president until the elections scheduled for later this year.

While in power, Joseph appealed to the US and UN for troops to defend the country's vital infrastructure, but so far those requests [have been denied](#), in part because of their lack of specificity. However, the US has sent some [federal police officials](#) to evaluate how the US can help the investigation.

For months before Moïse's death, millions of Haitians [had been protesting](#) in the streets in spite of deadly police and gang violence, demanding that Moïse step aside in line with a Superior Court ruling that his presidential term had expired. Moïse had ruled by decree since early 2020 after allowing most of parliament's terms to expire without calling new elections and had planned a new constitutional referendum that critics said aimed to cement his hold on power. Despite this, the US and Organization of American States Core Group continued in their support for Moïse.

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Photos: Meet 'Checkmate', Sukhoi's Sleek New Fifth-Gen Fighter Jet for Half the Cost of an F-35

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Tuesday, Russia's Sukhoi aircraft design bureau unveiled a sleek new fighter jet intended to rival Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Based on technology from its Su-57 fighter, Sukhoi has dubbed the new fighter "Checkmate."

A prototype of the Checkmate fighter was the opening act for the MAKS-2021 air show at Zhukovsky Airport southeast of Moscow, which runs from July 20-25 and of which Sputnik is the official media partner. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the exhibit on its opening day. "It will indeed be oriented towards African countries, India and Vietnam. The demand for these aircraft is quite high, it is estimated at least 300 aircraft in the near future," Russian Deputy Prime Minister [Yuri Borisov said](#) at the presentation on Tuesday. Sukhoi expects to begin deliveries in under six years.

Also at the presentation, Rostec chief [Sergei Chemezov said](#) the Checkmate would cost roughly \$25-30 million each, which is just a fraction of the price of some advanced European fighter jets like the Dassault Rafale and Saab Gripen, to say nothing of Lockheed's F-35.

"Why were we able to make this aircraft so quickly? We used the Su-57 developments," Chemezov explained, noting that among these were the jet's single engine and its avionics systems.

The Checkmate will also be able to deploy missile-shaped drones from its internal weapons bay, according to the presentation. The fighter will be able to reach speeds of up to Mach 2.2 and an altitude of 54,000 feet.

As a fifth-generation aircraft, the Checkmate will have greatly reduced radar visibility, vectored thrust capability or "supermaneuverability," and likely also supercruise, meaning it would be able to hit supersonic speeds without needing to use the gas-guzzling afterburner.

Notable differences from the Su-57 include its single engine, which will make the Checkmate much lighter but also unable to recover from a burnout; the single diverterless supersonic inlet mounted under the nose; and the four angled tail surfaces, which give it a profile evocative of the [failed YF-23](#) Black Widow, a competitor design to the aircraft that the Pentagon later adopted as the F-22.

Its name, Checkmate, is notably left untranslated from English even in Russian, where the winning move of a game of chess is called "shakh-i-mat." That leaves little doubt about who the recipient of the message is.

While the US has refused to sell its advanced F-22 Raptor fighter to other nations, the jet's sister aircraft, the F-35, has been marketed to several, including many NATO allies but also US partners like Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Thus, Checkmate is Moscow's winning reply to the proliferation of F-35s around the globe.

However, Washington has attempted to frustrate sales of advanced Russian military hardware to other nations through punitive measures such as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which the US uses to impose sanctions on the equipment's buyers. [Targeted systems](#) include the Su-35 fighter and S-400 air defense system.

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Texas Senate Advances Anti-Critical Race Theory Bill Banning Lessons that KKK Was 'Morally Wrong'
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A year after the massive Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, conservatives are scrambling to unring the bell and reject critical examinations of US history, choosing instead to emphasize a narrative of the nation's development that smooths over many of the more uncomfortable details.

The Texas Senate recently passed a bill against Critical Race Theory that rolls back, among other lessons, the ability of teachers to teach that what the white supremacist terrorist group the Ku Klux Klan did was "morally wrong."

[Senate Bill 3](#) seeks to undo parts of another law passed last month, which was itself a very restrictive bill reacting to the supposed teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools, which opponents say is anti-American.

[Critical Race Theory](#) is an academic movement based on the theory that racism may still be present in laws, rules, and institutional practices that don't explicitly mention race or privilege one race over another. It became the target of conservative ire in the wake of the nationwide

uprisings against anti-Black police violence and white supremacy that rocked the United States last summer, following the death of George Floyd at the hands of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

Those protests, billed by many as part of a reckoning with white supremacy in US history and its enduring facets in the present, encouraged many to take a more critical look at that history, including [the US military](#).

Editing An Already-Restrictive Bill

One section of [the June law](#) that would be struck if Senate Bill 3 became law requires students be taught about “historical documents related to the civic accomplishments of marginalized populations.”

The section to be cut includes “the Chicano movement,” a civil rights struggle by Mexicans and their descendants who lived in the parts of Mexico that were annexed by the US after the 1846-48 Mexican-American War; “women’s suffrage and equal rights”; and “the history of white supremacy, including but not limited to the institution of slavery, the eugenics movement, and the Ku Klux Klan, and the ways in which it is morally wrong.”

However, the bill doesn’t stop there: it also cuts studies of Black civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, the works of Chicano labor leader Cesar Chavez, women’s suffragist Susan B. Anthony’s writings about the struggle to win women the right to vote, and documents about Native American history.

It further bans teachers from teaching that “the advent of slavery in the territory that is now the United States constituted the true founding of the United States; or with respect to their relationship to American values, slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality.”

The June law, passed as House Bill 3979, said that “a teacher may not be compelled to discuss a particular current event or widely debated and currently controversial issue of public policy or social affairs,” also adding that “a teacher who chooses to discuss a topic described by Subdivision (1) shall, to the best of the teacher’s ability, strive to explore the topic from diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective.” This language is preserved in Senate Bill 3.

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, [said Friday](#) the bill would “make certain that critical race philosophies including the debunked 1619 founding myth, are removed from our school curriculums statewide,” referring to the [New York Times’ 1619 Project](#), a Black history project which derives its name from the date the first enslaved Africans arrived in the English colonies that were to become the United States.

“Parents want their students to learn how to think critically, not be indoctrinated by the ridiculous leftist narrative that America and our Constitution are rooted in racism,” he added.

However, on the other side, critics said the bill is an unnecessary intrusion into the teaching of certain topics about which teachers cannot simply teach both sides.

“How could a teacher possibly discuss slavery, the Holocaust, or the mass shootings at the Walmart in El Paso or at the Sutherland Springs church in my district without giving deference to any one perspective?,” asked State Sen. Judith Zaffirini, a Democrat.

Terror Group Spreads Hate for 150 Years

The Ku Klux Klan, better known simply as the KKK or The Klan, is a [white supremacist group](#) formed by ex-Confederate soldiers and officials after the pro-slavery movement's defeat in the US Civil War in 1865.

The group targeted for assassination rising Black figures as well as whites who ran schools, clinics or social services that helped the Black community after the end of slavery, and was crushed by the US federal government just years after forming.

However, it re-emerged in the 1910s with a wider focus than just violence against Black people, including anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ attitudes, anti-Catholic, and opposition to the teaching of Darwinian evolution in schools. It played a major role in the right-wing movement to preserve legal racial segregation in the US South in the 1940s-60s, using similar terrorist tactics as before, but was never repressed like it was in the 1870s.

The US government considers the KKK and its various iterations to be [terrorist organizations](#) and the US Department of Homeland Security has said white supremacist groups "remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland."

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US, Germany Reach Deal Allowing Completion of Nord Stream 2, WSJ Reports
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Ukraine and Poland have claimed construction of a new gas pipeline from Russia to Germany that doesn't go through their territory is a threat to their security. Berlin has largely dismissed their fears, noting gas will continue to flow through existing pipelines on their lands and that sanctions can counter Russia potentially "turning off the tap."

Citing "officials from Berlin and Washington," the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday that the US and Germany had reached an agreement to allow completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. According to the report, the two NATO allies could announced the deal as soon as Wednesday.

"Germany under the agreement will agree to assist Ukraine in energy-related projects and diplomacy," the [New York paper noted](#).

The gas pipeline, which will bring heating and power-generating fuel to Western Europe from Russia via an undersea route beneath the Baltic, has been targeted by US administrations who claim it will give Moscow leverage over European affairs.

Last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel came to Washington to meet with US President Joe Biden, during which time they discussed Nord Stream 2, among other topics. [Afterward, Merkel said](#) they had "come to different assessments as to what this project entails."

The longtime German leader said [earlier this year](#) that she didn't see what the hubbub in Washington was about, since "the gas delivered through Nord Stream 2, which isn't yet flowing, is no worse than the gas from Nord Stream 1, that which flows through Ukraine, and that which comes across Turkey from Russia."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has similarly said the project is purely economic in scope.

Biden, and former US President Donald Trump, have claimed the pipeline is a threat to Ukrainian and Polish energy security because it bypasses them via an undersea route. Trump tried to convince Berlin to renege on the deal and European Union investors to stop coordinating with Russian energy company Gazprom on the project. However, Trump was also partially motivated by his desire to convince Germany and other nations to buy American liquid natural gas instead of Russian gas.

In December 2020, Trump vetoed a bill that would have sanctioned Germany for continuing to pursue the project, which will bring an additional 55 billion cubic meters of gas westward each year, but his veto was overruled and the law took effect. Still, while the US sanctioned the Russian [pipe-laying vessel Fortuna](#) working on the pipeline and the limited liability company that owns it, KVT-Rus, it has [waived sanctions](#) on other target entities ever since, with Biden saying recently he would reconsider the policy after the pipeline is complete. [Germany has rejected](#) the very notion of US sanctions due to the pipeline, saying they violate European sovereignty. In response, some critical Republican lawmakers, such as US Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), have [pledged to block](#) any further consideration of nominations by Biden to ambassadorial posts until sanctions are imposed on the pipeline.

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Longtime Trump Ally, Adviser Thomas Barrack Indicted Over Illegal UAE Lobbying
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The longtime Trump confidant had been placed under federal investigation for at least two years after authorities grew concerned about his business practices following a May 2016 speech by the former president that appeared to praise the United Arab Emirates.

Thomas J. Barrack, a billionaire businessman who also happens to be a longtime friend of former US President Donald Trump, has been arrested and charged for violating foreign lobbying laws, the US Department of Justice announced on Tuesday.

A [release](#) issued by the agency details that Barrack was taken into custody in California and indicted on charges that allege the businessman lobbied on behalf of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over a two-year period between April 2016 and April 2018.

"The indictment charges conduct relating to the defendant's unlawful efforts to advance the interests of the UAE in the United States at the direction of senior UAE officials by influencing the foreign policy positions of the campaign of a candidate in the 2016 United States Presidential Election and, subsequently, the foreign policy positions of the United States government in the incoming administration, as well as seeking to influence public opinion in favor of UAE interests," the release reads.

At the time, Barrack, who is the founder of the private equity firm Colony Capital, acted as the chairman of Trump's 2017 inaugural fund.

Barrack was specifically charged with acting as an agent of a foreign government, obstruction of justice and making "multiple" false statements to federal agents. The obstruction and false

statement charges stem from a June 2019 interview that Barrack had with federal law enforcement agents.

The [seven-count indictment](#) filed in a New York federal court also states that Barrack was charged with acting as an agent alongside Colorado resident Matthew Grimes and UAE citizen Rashid Sultan Rashid Al Malik Alshahhi.

The filing notes that investigators were tipped off to Barrack's practices after it was determined that the Trump confidant had allegedly sprinkled in notably positive remarks about the UAE into a May 2016 speech that was given by the former president.

Claims put forth by the Justice Department also cite email exchanges between Barrack and Alshahhi, as well as incidents in which defendants were given "talking points" from unidentified senior UAE officials.

"The conduct alleged in the indictment is nothing short of a betrayal of those officials in the United States, including the former President," Mark Lesko, acting US attorney for the Eastern District of New York, said in a statement accompanying the release.

"Through this indictment, we are putting everyone - regardless of their wealth or perceived political power - on notice that the Department of Justice will enforce the prohibition of this sort of undisclosed foreign influence."

Barrack and Grimes are expected to make their first court appearances later Tuesday in Los Angeles, before US Magistrate Judge Patricia Donahue. Matthew Herrington, Barrack's attorney, [informed](#) CNBC that his client was taken into custody "despite the fact that we've cooperated with this investigation from the outset."

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Lactose Intolerance - Cartoon

American ice cream company Ben & Jerry's recently drew the ire of the Israeli government after the firm released a statement revealing that it would no longer be selling its products in the "occupied Palestinian territory", claiming that "it is inconsistent" with the company's values. One day after the announcement, tensions have only escalated.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett took the opportunity on Tuesday to reiterate his concerns regarding the move to halt sales of Ben & Jerry's products in areas the ice cream company considers occupied by the state of Israel, warning that the consequences would be "severe." A [statement](#) released by Bennett's office on Twitter details that the Israeli prime minister managed to discuss the matter with Alan Jope, the CEO of Unilever, which acquired Ben & Jerry's in 2000.

"Prime Minister Bennett emphasized that from the perspective of the State of Israel, this is an action that has severe consequences, including legal, and it will take strong action against any boycott directed against its citizens," reads the post, which also underscored that Bennett told Jope that the sales decision is "a clearly anti-Israel step."

Bennett's move came hours after it was revealed the Monday announcement was issued by Unilever, not the [independent board](#) that maintains authority over the ice cream company's social missions. Ben & Jerry's operations in the region date back to the late 1980s.

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UK Cuts Off Funding to British Chip Factory Acquired by Chinese-Owned Company - Report by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called for a review into the early July acquisition of UK microchip factory Newport Wafer Fab after it was revealed that the company that purchased the firm was owned by a Chinese tech agency.

The UK Research and Investment (UKRI) has suspended its grants to microchip factory Newport Wafer Fab (NWF) at the direction of the British government after the company was sold to a Chinese-owned technology firm, it was revealed on Tuesday.

Although Newport Wafer Fab was bought out by Netherlands-based company Nexperia, it has been detailed that the Dutch business is in turn owned by Wingtech, which happens to be a Chinese company backed by Beijing investors.

Details of the grant blockage was first [reported](#) by The Telegraph. The UK outlet reported that British ministers chose to pull back on the taxpayer funds after it was determined that Newport Wafer Fab had received multiple, publicly-funded multimillion-dollar projects.

Among those pricy projects is a 2019 defense push to create high-frequency microchips to use in radars and 5G networks as part of an even larger effort to strengthen the UK's chip supply chains. It remains unclear whether the initiative will remain active following the company's \$88 million sale to Nexperia.

At present, the sale is under investigation by Sir Stephen Lovegrove, who serves as British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's national security adviser, over concerns that the handover may have national security implications.

"This is very difficult business," Johnson previously remarked of the probe, underscoring that Lovegrove would be reviewing the factory's sale despite it being previously cleared by ministers. "We're looking into it."

Johnson has recently reiterated that the deal could potentially be blocked under the UK's newly-introduced National Security and Investment Act, should the sale ultimately be ruled a security threat.

However, it's worth noting that Johnson has also [stressed](#) that his intentions are simply to assess implications tied to the factory's sale, and are not part of an "anti-China spirit to pitchfork away every investment from China into this country."

Nexperia, which initially became the second-largest shareholder of NWF in 2019, confirmed its intention to acquire the microchip factory in early July. At the time, the Dutch company indicated that it sought out the sale in order to help meet the rising demand for chip

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Cummings Tell-All: Former UK Adviser Reveals Allies Briefly Discussed Potential Johnson Ouster
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since leaving office in late 2020, former chief adviser Dominic Cummings has become an outspoken critic of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, especially in regards to the government's lackluster response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Offering more insight on his former post, Cummings recently granted a tell-all interview to the BBC.

Shortly after the 2019 UK elections, in which the Boris Johnson-led Conservatives saw big gains, allies within the prime minister's party momentarily began to weigh the possibility of replacing the recently-elected leader, former chief adviser Dominic Cummings revealed on Tuesday.

Cummings made the grand revelation during a sit-down interview with the BBC's political editor Laura Kuenssberg that went on to discuss a variety of topics that touched on his current sentiments about Brexit and the relationship he currently has with Johnson, among other talking points.

One of the bigger takeaways from the interview was the moment the former chief adviser detailed that within days of the Conservatives winning the landslide general election, he and allies began to discuss the potential removal of Johnson.

"We were already saying, 'By the summer either we'll all have gone from here, or we'll be in the process of trying to get rid of him and get someone else in as prime minister,'" Cummings told Kuenssberg.

"He doesn't have a plan, he doesn't know how to be prime minister and we only got him in there because we had to solve a certain problem - not because he was the right person to be running the country."

He further detailed that Carrie Johnson, the prime minister's wife, also became a touchy subject at the time, as she had allegedly attempted to influence cabinet appointments. Cummings specifically mentioned that Carrie had wanted him and a few other unidentified staffers off Downing Street.

"The situation we found ourselves in is that, within days, [we] were in a situation where the prime minister's girlfriend is trying to get rid of us and appoint complete clowns to certain key jobs," the former adviser recalled.

Cummings went on to allege that Carrie's thinking reportedly shifted from acknowledging that Cummings and members of the Vote Leave team were needed to win the 2019 election to simply wanting to do away with them once the results were cemented.

"As soon as the election was won, her view was 'Why should it be Dominic and the Vote Leave team? Why shouldn't it be me that's pulling the strings?'" Cummings alleged.

It was by January 2020 that many staffers soon began to fear whether they would continue to have a job within Johnson's cabinet.

Addressing one of many of Cummings' claims, a Downing Street spokesperson relayed to the BBC that "political appointments are entirely made by the prime minister," and not their spouses. Brexit Yay or Nay

Although Cummings was considered one of the architects of the 2016 Vote Leave campaign, he raised some eyebrows among viewers after indicating he was not entirely certain whether the Brexit efforts were a good idea.

"I think anyone who says they're sure about questions like that [Brexit] has got a screw loose, whether you're on the remain side or our side," Cummings told Kuenssberg. "I think one of the reasons why we won is precisely, in Vote Leave we didn't think that we're definitely right and Remainers are all idiots or traitors or anything else."

"I think it's perfectly reasonable to say Brexit was a mistake, and history will prove that, of course, it's reasonable for some people to think that."

And then there's the [controversial claim](#) from 2016 that the UK was giving the European Union hundreds of millions in funding every week, an allegation that was repeatedly rejected by officials.

Cummings admitted during the tell-all interview that the allegation was put out by the Leave campaign as a sort of trap to "try and drive the Remain campaign and the people running it crazy, so they would start arguing about it."

Asked about whether such tactics and others tapped by the Leave campaign left a mark on the country's political sphere, Cummings lamented that "the way in which the world has worked out since 2016 vindicates the arguments that Vote Leave made in all sorts of ways."

No Calls With Johnson

In the several months that have gone by since resigning from his Downing Street post, Cummings lamented that he has not spoken to Johnson.

However, he did state that Johnson had attempted to get in touch after the pair parted ways, but that he chose to not respond to the prime minister's phone call, underscoring it ultimately does not "bother [him] one way or the other" whether the once dynamic duo ever speak again.

After submitting his resignation, Cummings in fact became one of Johnson's biggest critics after having repeatedly attacked the prime minister's efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. At one point, Cummings revealed during the BBC interview that he once had to [convince](#) Johnson against hosting weekly meetings with Queen Elizabeth II.

Regardless of all the criticism he's tossed in Johnson's direction, Cummings did state that his efforts were not rooted out of a need for revenge, especially his decision to sit down for the BBC tell-all.

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'Dangerous Situation': Massive Oregon Wildfire Alters Weather Patterns While Burning Over 380K Acres
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ahead of the 2021 fire season, experts warned that disastrous wildfires could emerge across the US West Coast as a result of the region's worsening drought and intense heat waves. Forecasters previously indicated that the season could see as much as 9.5 million acres consumed by wildfires, a stark increase from the 4.3 million acres burned in 2020.

A massive wildfire burning through much of Oregon for the last two weeks has grown so large and intense that it is beginning to change weather patterns and prompt air quality alerts for individuals on the US East Coast, officials revealed on Tuesday.

The latest figures released by US government agencies state that the ever-growing Bootleg wildfire has burned through roughly 388,359 acres, and is only about 30% contained despite continued efforts by first responders. The fire has destroyed over 70 homes and structures. At present, some 2,250 individuals are on scene battling the blaze and attempting to mark out treated lines along the fire to prevent it from spreading elsewhere; however, measures have been repeatedly paused over the fire's unpredictable conditions.

Marcus Kauffman, a spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Forestry, has offered some insight on the Bootleg blaze, [telling](#) the New York Times that the "fire is so large and generating so much energy and extreme heat that it's changing the weather."

"Normally the weather predicts what the fire will do," Kaufmann emphasized. "In this case, the fire is predicting what the weather will do."

Officials have sounded off on [pyrocumulus clouds](#) that have repeatedly emerged within the Bootleg fire, noting that once such bodies form, they essentially produce their own thunderstorms that contain violent lightning and strong winds.

In one instance last week, the conditions of the Bootleg fire produced a pyrocumulonimbus, the so-called "big brother" of pyrocumulus clouds that can create extremely hot winds and fuel wildfires. Estimates suggest the cloud shockingly rose over 40,000 feet.

"It's kind of an extreme, dangerous situation," Chuck Redman, a forecaster with the National Weather Service stationed at the fire command headquarters in Oregon, told the Times.

Smoke & Haze From Wildfires Reach US East Coast

The wildfire situation across much of the US West Coast has reached such a high intensity that smoke and haze caused by the churning blazes have started to cover parts of the US East Coast.

The National Weather Service's New York station revealed earlier Tuesday that smoke and haze have been spotted across much of the tri-state area.

In fact, the smoky haze has prompted poor air quality readings in parts of Vermont and northern New York, according to [advisories](#) issued by the National Weather Service. The Air Quality Index placed readings in the Empire State at an "unhealthy" 155 grade.

Similar warnings were [issued](#) during the deadly 2020 fire season after wildfire smoke from California and Oregon managed to stretch out and reach the US East Coast, instantly causing poor air quality.

The Bootleg blaze is just one of 83 large active fires that are being battled across 13 states, according to [figures](#) provided by the National Interagency Fire Center, which noted that over 1.2 million acres have been destroyed thus far.

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US, Ukrainian Officials Discuss Concerns, Commitments on Nord Stream 2 - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Counselor of the Department Derek Chollet met with Ukrainian officials in Ukraine to discuss US concerns and commitments on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline amid reports of an imminent deal on the project between the US and Germany, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"The Counselor and the senior Ukrainian officials discussed our shared concerns about the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and US commitments to ensure Russia cannot use energy as a coercive tool against Ukraine or any other country in Europe," the State Department said in a statement. The Wall Street Journal reported earlier on Tuesday that US and German officials have reached an agreement that would allow for the project's completion and are expected to announce the deal on Wednesday. Politico on Tuesday reported that the Biden administration conveyed to Ukrainian counterparts that Kyiv should not engage in criticism of the forthcoming deal.

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Pfizer, BioNTech to Produce COVID-19 Vaccine in South Africa – Statement

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – Pfizer and BioNTech have signed an agreement with South Africa's Biovac Institute to produce the COVID-19 vaccine in South Africa for the African Union, Pfizer said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE today announced the signing of a letter of intent with The Biovac Institute Ltd, known as Biovac, a Cape Town-based, South African biopharmaceutical company, to manufacture the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine for distribution within the African Union," the statement said.

Both companies expect that Biovac's Cape Town facility will be incorporated in their global vaccine supply chain by the end of 2021, while technical processes and on-site equipment activities will start immediately, the statement added.

"Our latest collaboration with Biovac is a shining example of the tireless work being done, in this instance to benefit Africa," Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla said.

He promised to continue efforts to expand the vaccine supply chain in other regions, including Latin America.

At full operational capacity, the annual production will exceed 100 million finished doses, which will be distributed within the 55 member states of the African Union, the statement said.

To date, Pfizer and BioNTech have shipped more than 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses to more than 100 countries or territories in every region of the world, according to the statement.

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RPT - US Court Sentences Russia's Levashov to Time Served, 3 Years of Supervised Release - Judge

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A US federal court in Connecticut sentenced Russian national Peter Levashov to time served and three years of supervised release for fraud and computer crime.

"I have decided that sentence of time served is sufficient," US District Judge Robert Chatigny said during Levashov's sentencing hearing on Tuesday. "You have been already in custody for approximately 33 months. 33 months is a long time."

Chatigny added that Levashov would be sentenced to three years of supervised release during which he will have to abide by certain conditions.

"I do impose a sentence of supervised release for a period of 3 years. While on supervised release, you will have to comply with the mandatory and standard conditions of supervised release," Chatigny added.

The judge noted that in case of the removal from the US and coming back within these 3 years, Levashov will have to inform authorities about his return.

"If you are removed from the US, you will remain outside the US, unless you are legally authorized to re-enter. If you do re-enter the United States during this 3-year period then you will be required to report to the nearest probation office within 72 hours after you return to the US," he said.

Chatigny also said Levashov must sign an agreement stipulating that he will never use his computer skills in an illegal way in the future. In case of restitution ordered, he will have to pay all of it in full, he added.

"Thank you," Levashov responded when asked if he would like to say anything.

Levashov's lawyer Vadim Glozman told Sputnik his client desires to reunite with his wife and son.

"Peter Levashov is an extraordinary person both in his professional and his personal life. I think, the judge, as I did, saw the good in him and came to the right sentence," Glozman said.

In 2018, Levashov pleaded guilty to one count of causing intentional damage to a protected computer, one count of conspiracy, one count of wire fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft after being extradited to the United States from Spain.

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RPT - Cuban Americans March From Miami to DC to Protest Against US Embargo

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A group of US Cuban activists are marching throughout the country to protest against Washington's longtime embargo on the island nation and draw attention to the suffering it has caused, group leader Carlos Lazo told Sputnik.

The White House has slammed the Cuban government for its crackdown on protests amid the country's economic crisis and on Tuesday even threatened to sanction officials. President Joe Biden last week said the United States will not allow Americans to send money to relatives in Cuba.

"We are walking from Miami to Washington, DC 2,000 kilometers (1,300 miles) to protest against the embargo," Lazo said. "In this journey, we are contacting and talking to every American that we can."

EMBARGO CAUSES SUFFERING

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different American laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but the policy was reversed by the Trump administration.

"Most regulations have hurt overall Cuban people. For example, during the last two years, the Trump administration implemented sanctions and tightened sanctions that create suffering of the Cuban people," Lazo said.

He accused former President Donald Trump of cutting programs that allowed ethnic Cubans living in the US to send money to their relatives in the island.

"Even the American embassy in Havana was closed, and now, if people want to get a visa and visit families, they have to deal with the difficulty of going to other countries to try to get those visas," he said.

Lazo, 56, was born and spent half of his life in Cuba. He said he was imprisoned after the first failed attempt to run to the US, and came to Florida after his second in the late 1980s.

The decorated US Army veteran of the Iraq war noted that despite differences with the Cuban government he supports the people of Cuba.

"I have been the witness of all this suffering that the embargo has caused to the Cuban families during many years," Lazo said. "The embargo was established with intent of overthrowing the Cuban government, but all the measures implemented by the embargo really hurt innocent Cuban people. I have seen that for so many years."

In fact, the activists see the embargo as a major cause of the recent protests in Cuba.

"I think, these protests are fueled by the fact that this embargo has created desperation on the Cuban people [and] hunger," Lazo said. "That made people to get desperate and go to the street because they do not have food, medications."

Lifting the embargo will allow Americans to provide real support for the Cubans, he added.

REGULAR AMERICANS SUPPORT US

Speaking of the march itself, Lazo said they have serious support from everyday Americans.

"In our way, we have found support from many Americans, who find this blockade as something very unhuman and unjust," he said, adding that the group of six activists does approximately 60 miles per day.

The activists are going to churches, local organizations and communities, explaining their position on the embargo. They already visited Orlando, St. Augustine, Jacksonville, Atlanta, Raleigh and other big cities and small towns, Lazo said.

In North Carolina they were able to meet with members of the state Senate, he added. "We are trying to talk to different organizations, people from different backgrounds, and Democrats, Republicans, veterans, peace activists," the activist said. While being in Washington, protesters plan to organize a peaceful rally in front of the White House and send a petition with 26,000 signatures to Biden urging him to lift the blockade, he added.

DEATH THREATS

Lazo has emphasized that the group did not face problems with police on the way, but received some "warnings," including death threats, from opponents.

"We have a peaceful march and do not see any opposition from the police on the way. We received only support from Americans," he said. "However, in Miami in the beginning we got several threats, especially from those Cuban Americans who oppose our efforts."

Some tried to hit group members with their car, other opponents sent death threats online, with many accusing them of sympathizing with communists.

Lazo said these accusations are not true.

"We are doing this rally as a work of love," he concluded.

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Antonov Says Some US Politicians Want to Use Ukraine as Tool to Change Moscow's Policies

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov during an interview said some US politicians are only interested in using Ukraine as a tool to change Moscow's independent foreign and economic policy.

"It seems to me that some [US] political figures, some [US] politicians only would like to use Ukraine as a tool to press on Russia to change Russian independent foreign policy, Russian economic policy," Antonov told RT on Tuesday when asked about American opposition to Nord Stream 2.

Antonov emphasized that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is purely for economic purposes, meant to diversify the energy market.

The United States and Russia should focus on working together to confront issues related to international terrorism, Afghanistan post-US exit, and climate change, Antonov said.

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier on Tuesday that US and German officials have reached an agreement that will allow for the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany and are expected to announce the deal as soon as Wednesday.

The United States has stood in opposition to the project since its beginning in 2012, but the decision to allow for its completion comes as Washington turns its focus toward establishing closer ties with European partners such as Berlin.

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Canadian Military Advocacy Group Calls for Help in Efforts to Relocate Afghan Interpreters

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A Canadian military advocacy group is calling for volunteers to help efforts to relocate and integrate Afghan interpreters who are facing imminent danger amid the US withdrawal from the war-torn country.

"On behalf of the Conference of Defense Associations and the CDA Institute, I am writing to seek your support and assistance in helping to welcome and integrate Afghan refugees into our communities," Lt.-Gen Guy Thibault, former Vice Chief of the Defense Staff and President of the Conference of Defense Associations (CDA), said in statement on Tuesday.

Volunteers are needed to help prospective refugees settle into life in Canada, the statement said.

The call for help from one of Canada's largest military advocacy groups is in line with the efforts of other Canadian Afghan war veterans' communities, some of whom have undertaken direct action to help translators.

Top Canadian officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, have said that Ottawa is working to assist the interpreters, who the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) views as traitors, and vowed that an announcement is imminent.

Last week, US Central Command said the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is more than 95 percent complete. Meanwhile, reports suggest that the Taliban movement now controls 85 percent of Afghanistan.

The evacuation of Afghan interpreters is also a hot topic in the United States, where officials have said that aides to the US mission in Afghanistan will be relocated to third countries while their special immigrant visas are processed.

The Canadian military, which was primarily active in Kandahar, exited the Afghan war in 2014.

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Biden Adviser Sullivan, Tikhanovskaya Discuss Possible Belarus Sanctions - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya at the White House to discuss issues including possible sanctions against President Alexander Lukashenko's government, National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne said.

"The United States, together with partners and allies, will continue to hold the Lukashenka regime accountable for its actions, including through the imposition of sanctions," Horne said in a statement on Tuesday.

Tikhanovskaya also met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday in what the State Department called an "unprecedented level of engagement" with a Belarusian figure in this century. The two reportedly discussed the political situation in Belarus, the release of political prisoners, inclusive dialogue, and new elections.

Tikhanovskaya said in an interview that the US and European Union could be braver, faster, and stronger when it came to supporting democratic aspirations in Belarus.

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Biden Announces Presidential Delegation to Tokyo Olympics, Names First Lady as Leader

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden revealed First Lady Jill Biden will lead the presidential delegation to the Tokyo Olympics, the White House said in a press release "President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. today announced the designation of a Presidential Delegation to Japan to attend the Opening Ceremony and events of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games beginning Friday, July 23, 2021," the release said on Tuesday. "First Lady of the United States Jill Biden will lead the delegation."

Interim Charge d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Tokyo, Raymond Greene, will be the only other US official to join Jill Biden at the opening ceremony.

Since July 1, the Organizing Committee has recorded more than 70 cases of the coronavirus among people related to the Games, including athletes, members of foreign delegations and personnel. More than 30 of these cases are foreign nationals.

The Summer Olympics in Tokyo were initially scheduled for 2020 but were postponed in the spring of last year when the coronavirus pandemic was at its worst. The Games are currently scheduled to be held from July 23 until August 8.

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4th Person With Ties to Oath Keepers Pleads Guilty for Role in Capitol Riot- Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A fourth individual with ties to the Oath Keepers group pleaded guilty to trying to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election on January 6, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Caleb Berry, 20 of Tampa, Fla., an affiliate of the Oath Keepers, pleaded guilty today to conspiracy and to breaching the US Capitol for the purpose of obstructing Congress' certification of the electoral college on January 6," the release said on Tuesday.

Berry faces up to 25 years in prison, but a sentencing date has not yet been scheduled for him because he has agreed to cooperate with federal investigators in their ongoing investigation of the January 6 unrest, the release said.

US federal judge Amit Mehta will hold a status hearing for Berry on September 21, the release said.

More than 535 people have been arrested on charges related to the January 6 Capitol riot, including over 165 people charged with assaulting, resisting or impeding law enforcement, the release said.

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US to Join WTO Domestic Service Laws to Aid Licensing of American Professionals - USTR

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has expressed its intent to join the World Trade Organization's effort on domestic service laws to assist overseas licensing for US services professionals, the Office of US Trade Representative (USTR) said.

The move represents "an opportunity to improve the transparency and fairness of processes for obtaining licenses to provide services by US professionals such as engineers, architects, and environmental consultants, as well as for US firms in fields such as retailing, express delivery, and financial services", the Office of USTR said in a statement on Tuesday.

The intention to join the WTO Joint Statement Initiative on Services Domestic Regulation and support the conclusion of the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference initiative complements Washington's ideals for fairness on the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, the statement said.

"The rules under negotiation build on the improvements to transparency and due process in services trade introduced in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement," the statement said.

"In a first for the WTO, the negotiations also seek to bar discrimination between men and women in issuing these licenses, recognizing the negative impact such practices have on economic opportunity."

Improved transparency and regulatory processes also support democratic values, open societies and a worker-centric trade agenda at the WTO, the statement added.

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Levashov's lawyer Vadim Glozman told Sputnik his client desires to reunite with his wife and son.

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US Stocks Rebound in Dip-Buying Tuesday After Previous Day's Collapse

NEW YORK, July 20 (Sputnik) - US stocks rebounded broadly on Tuesday from the previous day's collapse as investors buying dips helped steady a market still reverberating on worries about a resurgence in coronavirus cases from the Delta variant.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, closed up 550 points, or 1.5 percent, at 4,323. The Dow fell 2.1 percent on Tuesday for its sharpest loss since January 29.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, rose 65 points, or 1.5 percent, to settle at 4,323. The S&P500 lost almost exactly the same value on Monday.

The Nasdaq Composite, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, finished up 224 points, or 1.6 percent, at 14,499. Nasdaq was the outperformer of the session, gaining more than the 0.9 percent it lost last week.

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Majority of Canadians Oppose Reopening of Canada-US Border, Back Vaccine Passports - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The majority of Canadians oppose the reopening of the land border with the United States, a new Leger poll revealed.

The findings after Ottawa announced a day earlier that it is reopening its borders to vaccinated US citizens and permanent residents on August 9 and to all vaccinated foreign travelers on September 7.

The poll found that 52 percent of Canadians are opposed to the total reopening of the Canada-US borders by the end of August.

Opposition was highest in the Atlantic provinces and British Columbia, while the rest of the country was largely split on the issue.

Canadians' attitude is in stark contrast to the feelings south of the border, where polled Americans expressed support for the reopening of the borders by a near 3 to 1 margin. Two thirds of Canadians said that entry should be granted to only those fully vaccinated, the study showed.

The findings also showed strong support for COVID-19 vaccine passports, with 58 percent in favor of readily available proof of vaccination, while only 30 percent were opposed.

Respondents were most receptive to proof of vaccination being required for air and train travel as well as visiting a hospital. However, fewer than 40 percent endorsed mandatory vaccine passports at restaurant patios and outdoor shows or sporting events.

International travelers, including Americans, have been barred from entering Canada since March 2020, and Ottawa recently extended the border restrictions that limit so-called non-essential travel to and from the United States through July 21.

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US, German Officials Expected to Announce Nord Stream 2 Deal as Soon as Wednesday-Reports

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US and German officials have reached an agreement that will allow for the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany and are expected to announce the deal as soon as Wednesday, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The United States has stood in opposition to the project since its beginning in 2012, but the decision to allow for its completion comes as Washington turns its focus toward establishing closer ties with European partners such as Berlin.

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US Treasury Secretary, King Abdullah II Discuss Ways to Boost Jordan's Economy - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Jordan's King Abdullah II met in Washington to discuss opportunities to advance the Middle Eastern country's economy, the Treasury Department said.

"Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen met with His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein, King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," the Treasury Department said in a press release on Tuesday. "She noted the challenges Jordan faced, complicated by COVID, and encouraged His Majesty to continue to implement reforms that will help Jordan to boost sustainable growth and job creation."

Yellen also highlighted Jordan's partnership in fighting terrorist financing in the Middle East, the release said.

On Monday, King Abdullah II met with President Joe Biden at the White House and discussed security cooperation, particularly regarding the modernization of Jordan's F-16 fighter jet fleet. The king also met with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and discussed cooperation on regional security challenges.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) -

NORD STREAM 2

- * Negotiations between the United States and Germany on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline are ongoing, a German government source told Sputnik on Tuesday.
- * The White House expects the US State Department to provide more details on the reported Nord Stream 2 pipeline deal between the United States and Germany, spokesperson Jen Psaki said.
- * The United States and Germany have reached an agreement allowing the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and officials from both countries will announce the deal as soon as Wednesday, US media reported.
- * The Biden administration has conveyed to Ukrainian officials that Kiev should not engage in criticism of the forthcoming deal between the United States and Germany, US media reported.

OPEN SKIES TREATY

- * Russia said at the Open Skies Treaty conference on Tuesday that its decision to withdraw from the agreement was final and not subject to revision, Konstantin Gavrilov, the head of the Russian delegation at the Vienna talks on military security and arms control, told Sputnik.
- * Russia intends to fully enjoy the rights and fulfill the obligations of a state party to the Open Skies Treaty until December 18, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

TIKHANOVSKAYA'S VISIT TO US

- * Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's engagement in the United States this week has reached an unprecedented level for such a figure from the Eastern European country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.
- * Tikhanovskaya said that she hopes to meet with US President Joe Biden during her stay in Washington, though no such meeting has been scheduled.

US POLICY ON CUBA

- * The Biden administration is reviewing plans to increase staffing at the US embassy in Havana to ensure better engagement with the people of Cuba, as well as the appropriate level of security, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

* The Biden administration is working with the private sector and with Congress to determine ways to make the internet more accessible to the Cuban people, Price said.

JEFF BEZOS SPACE FLIGHT

* A spacecraft with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and a team of astronauts has successfully parachuted back on Earth after reaching space with the New Shepard rocket at 8:23 a.m. local time, Blue Origin's live webcast of the launch showed on Tuesday.

* Bezos announced that the Blue Origin spacecraft is going to fly two more manned missions to space in 2021 after completing successfully the first launch earlier in the day.

DEVELOPMENTS IN DONBAS

* The distribution of Russian passports to residents of the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR) cannot be considered an instrument or a sign of subsequent incorporation of these territories into Russia, Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak has said on Tuesday.

* The European Union's position on the conflict regulation in Donbas is inconsistent and contradictory, Kozak said.

* If those who organize openly nationalist violent actions in Kiev today come to power in Donbas, it will become a tragedy, it is obvious that Russia will not be indifferent, Kozak said.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON AFGHANISTAN

* The Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia) is ready for a political compromise in Afghanistan and is tired of war, Zamir Kabulov, the Russian president's special envoy for Afghanistan, said on Tuesday.

* The Taliban movement (banned in Russia) is not able to hold big administrative centers in Afghanistan even if it manages to seize control over them, Kabulov said.

* Kabulov expressed the belief that a military scenario is quite realistic in the country if the government and the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) fail to secure genuine progress in the political settlement.

* Russia believes that all allies of the United States will bear equal financial responsibility after the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and provide economic assistance to Kabul, Kabulov said.

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Over Half of Adults in US Want More Government Regulation of Big Tech Companies - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A majority of adults in the United States want more government control of large technology companies and more than two-thirds believe that big tech firms have too much influence over the economy, a PEW Research Center poll said on Tuesday.

"Some 56 percent of Americans think major technology companies should be regulated more than they are now, and 68% believe these firms have too much power and influence in the economy," a press release explaining the poll said.

The latest survey represents a statistically significant increase of those who say there should be more regulation, up from 47 percent in June 2020, the release said.

Increases in support for more regulation were recorded across most of the political spectrum, particularly among liberal Democrats, since PEW last asked the question in June 2020, the release added.

The poll comes amid growing calls by some lawmakers that big technology firms such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon and others be broken up into smaller companies - a strategy deployed against multiple US conglomerates such as Standard Oil in the early 20th century.

The survey was conducted April 12-18 from 4,623 panelists in a nationally representative sample of randomly selected US adults. The poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.2 percentage points, according to the release.

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US Condemns Deadly Islamic State Terror Attack in Baghdad - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the attack in Baghdad, Iraq, carried out by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) and extends condolences to the victims' families, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms the terrorist attack in Baghdad yesterday. ISIS [Islamic State] has claimed responsibility for the attack in Sadr City, which killed at least 30 people and injured dozens of others. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims and hope for a speedy recovery for all of those wounded," Price said.

The attack, carried out by a suicide bomber, also wounded 47 people. Sadr City has been a victim of three terrorist attacks this year, with the first two carried out in January and June.

This attack came on the eve of the Islamic holiday Eid al-Adha.

Price also condemned the rocket attacks near the presidential palace in Afghanistan's capital Kabul while gathered crowds there were engaged in Eid al-Adha prayers.

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Chatigny added that Levashov would be sentenced to three years of supervised release during which he will have to abide by certain conditions.

In 2018, Levashov pleaded guilty to one count of causing intentional damage to a protected computer, one count of conspiracy, one count of wire fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft after being extradited to the United States from Spain.

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US Warns Ukraine to Stay Quiet About Forthcoming Nord Stream 2 Deal - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has conveyed to Ukrainian counterparts that Kyiv should not engage in criticism of the forthcoming deal between the United States and Germany regarding the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Politico reported on Tuesday. The United States officials have also signaled to Kyiv that the existing bilateral relationship will suffer a damage if Ukrainian officials will discuss the United States and Germany's potential plans with members of the Congress, the report said.

According to the report, however, a senior Biden administration official noted that situation remains more nuanced than the one presented to the public.

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Biden Administration Working Group on Puerto Rico Holds First Meeting - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's Working Group on Puerto Rico has held its first planning meeting seeking ways to help the Caribbean island recover from recent devastating hurricanes and other problems, the White House said on Tuesday.

"Today, Domestic Policy Advisor Susan Rice, National Economic Adviser Brian Deese and Director of Intergovernmental Affairs Julie Rodriguez chaired the inaugural meeting of the White House Working Group on Puerto Rico," the White House said in a readout.

Participants in the session discussed Biden's plan to help Puerto Rico recover from Hurricanes Maria and Irma, its 2020 earthquakes and the coronavirus pandemic, the readout said.

"This means not just rebuilding but investing in the long-term resilience of the island so that its communities and infrastructure can withstand future disasters," the readout said.

Participants in the meeting received briefings from the Departments of the Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, Education and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on their efforts to coordinate their relief and recovery activities, the White House said.

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US Lowers COVID-19 Travel Advisory for India, But Raises UK to Highest Level - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said on Tuesday that it has removed India from its "Do Not Travel" list but recommends Americans not to travel to the United Kingdom given the spread of the Delta variant of the novel coronavirus.

The US State Department also said it does not recommend Americans travel to Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Fiji and the British Virgin Islands.

In addition, the advisory recommends Americans reconsider travel to Cabo Verde, Pakistan and Poland and exercise increased caution when traveling to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Moldova.

On Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also put the United Kingdom on the highest, fourth level COVID-19 risk rank, noting that even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk of getting and spreading the coronavirus variants.

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Pentagon IT Consulting Firm Settles Kickback Charges for \$4.8Mln - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A consulting firm that provides information technology services to the Defense Department will pay \$4.8 million to settle charges it paid kickbacks to minority subcontractors that did no work, the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"Sage [Consulting Group] and [Robert] Pleghardt agreed to pay \$4.8 million to settle allegations that they paid kickbacks to companies certified by the Small Business Administration (SBA) as 8(a) small businesses, which are owned and operated by socially and economically disadvantaged citizens," Justice said in a press release.

Sage and Pleghardt, the company's owner, falsely represented to government agencies that at least two 8(a) certified companies would be performing at least 50 percent of the work on contracts when, in fact, Sage performed 100 percent of the work, the release said.

The kickbacks consisted of fees paid to minority firms for every hour of work performed by Sage, the release added.

The settlement resolves federal civil claims under the False Claims Act and the Anti-Kickback Act. Sage and Pleghardt cooperated with the government's investigation, according to the release.

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Tikhanovskaya Engagement in US Reached 'Unprecedented' Level - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's engagement in the United States this week has reached an unprecedented level for such a figure from the Eastern European country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"The level of engagement that we saw yesterday with Ms. Tikhanovskaya was an unprecedented level of engagement with a Belarusian leader in this century," Price said. Tikhanovskaya on Monday met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Under Secretary Victoria Nuland, and State Department Counselor Derek Chollet, Price said. The Belarusian opposition leader will stay in Washington until July 23 before heading to New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles before the end of the month. According to her press office, Tikhanovskaya will also meet with National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and several senators on Tuesday.

Tikhanovskaya has said she will ask US officials to take action against the Belarusian government including with sanctions.

Belarus' opposition has not recognized the results of the most recent election, claiming that Tikhanovskaya was the real winner. The dispute resulted in mass protests across the country, which generally declined by February.

Minsk has opened criminal cases against several opposition leaders and other persons on charges linked to anti-government rallies.

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Biden Picks Veteran Lawyer Jonathan Kanter to Lead Antitrust Prosecutions - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has named veteran lawyer Jonathan Kanter to run the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department as its Assistant Attorney General, the White House announced on Tuesday.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate Jonathan Kanter for Assistant Attorney General for the Antitrust Division at the Department of Justice," the White House said. Kanter is currently a partner at the Kanter Law Group, a boutique antitrust law firm that advocates in favor of federal and state antitrust law enforcement, the White House said.

"Jonathan Kanter is a distinguished antitrust lawyer with over 20 years of experience. Throughout his career, Kanter has also been a leading advocate and expert in the effort to promote strong and meaningful antitrust enforcement and competition policy," the White House said.

Kanter previously worked as co-chair of the antitrust practice at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton, and Garrison and served as an attorney for the US Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Competition, the White House added.

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US Condemns Rocket Attacks on Presidential Palace in Kabul - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the rocket attacks on the presidential palace in Kabul and continues to call for peace in Afghanistan, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We condemn the rocket attacks on Kabul that occurred today. We continue to call for an accelerated path to a political settlement and an end to the violence," Price said during a press briefing.

On Monday, several rockets landed near the presidential palace during Muslim prayers for the Eid al-Adha holiday.

Price added that the people of Afghanistan are united in their desire for establishing a just and lasting peace and that US diplomacy is geared toward bringing that into effect.

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US Awards \$127Mln for 110 Projects to Trim Greenhouse Gas Emissions - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - More than 100 small businesses with processes that promise to reduce emissions responsible for climate change will receive grants totaling \$127 million to expand operations, the Energy Department said on Tuesday.

"These funding awards will help small businesses take their work to the next level, expand their operations and create new jobs, and be part of the fight against the existential crisis of our time – climate change," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release.

Some 110 projects in 26 US states will receive the grants to pursue technological solutions ranging from carbon management to grid reliability, the release said.

Examples include Princeton NuEnergy Incorporation in the state of New Jersey. The company will receive \$1.15 million to develop a process to recycle aged lithium ion batteries, the release said.

Arctura in the state Rhode Island will receive \$1.15 million to develop a wind turbine blade coating to reduce damage caused by lightning, the release added.

In addition, Susteon in the state of North Carolina will get \$1.6 million to develop a process that promises to reduce the cost of capturing carbon dioxide from the air, according to the release.

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Biden Admin Hopes to Refine US Sanctions by Talking to Ex-Officials in Charge - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo has held talks with six former officials, including those from the Trump administration, who had been responsible for sanctions applications as the White House tries to refine the use of such tools, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

Adeyemo led a virtual discussion on Monday with the ex-officials who served in the last three administrations to ensure the application of sanctions "remain relevant, rigorous, and fit to purpose, effectively advancing the national security, foreign policy, and economic aims of the United States," a Treasury statement said.

In return, the former officials told Adeyemo that US economic and financial sanctions were "not an end to themselves, but most effective when employed in the context of a broader US strategy to address a foreign policy or national security threat, and to maintain the integrity of the US financial system," the statement said.

The deputy treasury secretary and his guests also discussed the need to effectively calibrate sanctions to limit unintended consequences on US businesses, foreign partners, and other third parties, including entities engaged in legitimate humanitarian activities, the statement said.

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Ex-Trump Aide Charged With Acting as Foreign Agent of UAE - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's former aide and political ally Thomas Barrack has been charged with acting as an agent for the United Arab Emirates, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"A seven-count indictment was unsealed today in federal court in Brooklyn charging Thomas Joseph Barrack, Matthew Grimes, and Rashid Sultan Rashid Al Malik Alshahhi, a citizen of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with acting and conspiring to act as agents of the UAE between April 2016 and April 2018," the release said.

The indictment charges that the defendant worked at the direction of senior UAE officials to influence foreign policy positions of a 2016 presidential candidate and those of the US.

"As alleged, the defendants, using their positions of power and influence in a presidential election year, engaged in a conspiracy to illegally advance and promote the interests of the United Arab Emirates in this country, in flagrant violation of their obligation to notify the Attorney General of their activities and in derogation of the American people's right to know when a foreign government seeks to influence the policies of our government and our public opinion," Acting United States Attorney Jacquelyn Kasulis said in the release.

Following the 2016 US presidential election, Barack and the other defendants repeatedly acted at the direction of UAE officials to influence the foreign policy positions of the incoming administration in favor of UAE interests, the Justice Department said.

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US Federal Drug Enforcement Agent Arrested for Taking Part in Capitol Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US federal authorities charged a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent for taking part in the January 6 Capitol riot, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"[D]uring the course of the investigation into the events of January 6, 2021, law enforcement learned that Mark Sami Ibrahim of Orange County, California traveled to the District of Columbia, and participated," the department said in its criminal complaint to the US District Court in the District of Columbia.

Ibrahim was still a federal special agent at the time and was carrying his DEA-issued firearm. He had, several weeks before, given notice to the DEA of his intention to resign. He was on personal leave, was not on duty for the DEA and had no role as a law enforcement officer on the Capitol Grounds, the complaint acknowledged.

"According to Ibrahim's friend, Ibrahim went to the rally in order to promote himself - Ibrahim had been thinking about his next move after leaving the DEA and wanted the protests to be his stage for launching a 'Liberty Tavern' political podcast and cigar brand," the Justice Department said.

During the protest, Ibrahim posed for several photographs in which he flashed and displayed his DEA badge and firearm. Ibrahim's friend took these photos at Ibrahim's request. A video posted to the internet shows him carrying a flag with the words "Liberty or Death" inscribed, the complaint said.

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US Working With Private Sector to Make Internet More Accessible to Cubans - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with the private sector and Congress to determine ways to make the internet more accessible to the Cuban people, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"When it comes to internet access, we are working with the private sector as well as with Congress, which, of course, has a keen interest in all of this to identify viable options to make the internet more accessible to the Cuban people," Price said during a press briefing.

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Harris Meets With Jordan King Abdullah II to Discuss Middle East Challenges - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris met with King Abdullah II of Jordan at her residence in Washington to discuss the numerous challenges in the Middle East, Harris's Senior Adviser and Chief Spokesperson Symone Sanders said on Tuesday.

"The two leaders consulted on the many challenges confronting the Middle East, including the continuing tensions in the West Bank and Gaza, the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria and the importance of supporting stability, security and prosperity in Iraq," Sanders said in a statement.

On Monday, King Abdullah II met with President Joe Biden at the White House and discussed security cooperation, particularly regarding the modernization of Jordan's F-16 fighter jet fleet. The king also met with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and discussed cooperation on regional security challenges.

Sanders said Harris and Abdullah also talked about coronavirus-related challenges, economic recovery, regional water shortages and the participation of women and youth in the workforce.

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US Considering Increasing Staff at Cuban Embassy to Help With Consular Work - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is reviewing its plans to increase its staffing at the Havana embassy to ensure better engagement with the people of Cuba, as well as the appropriate level of security, State Department Press Secretary Ned Price said in a briefing on Tuesday.

"We are reviewing our plans to augment staffing at our embassy in Havana to facilitate the consular activities, the engagement with civil society and to make sure we have an appropriate security posture as well," Price said.

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US Trade Chief Discusses Fisheries, Large Aircraft With Spanish Counterpart - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States sought Spain's support for its fisheries subsidies negotiations at the World Trade Organization while reaffirming Washington's support for Europe's large civil aircraft industry, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said on Tuesday as it announced talks between the trade chiefs of the two countries.

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Spain's Trade Minister Maria Reyes Maroto also agreed to collaborate on other key bilateral trade and economic issues, the Office of the USTR said in a statement.

"Ambassador Tai reiterated the United States' support for the large civil aircraft framework that was reached with the European Union in June," the statement said. "Ambassador Tai and Minister Moroto discussed a number of WTO issues, including the ongoing fisheries subsidies negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO). The ambassador noted that the United States hopes to achieve a meaningful outcome and expressed her hope that Spain would support the Administration's WTO fisheries forced labor proposal."

The United States and the European Union, as well as the United Kingdom, agreed in June not to impose tariffs on large aircraft for five years to resolve the long-running dispute between the US aircraft manufacturer Boeing and EU aircraft manufacturer Airbus.

In May, the United States proposed that the WTO step up negotiations to curb harmful subsidies to fishing activities that may be associated with the use of forced labor such as illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

The WTO has been engaged for years in multilateral negotiations to prohibit harmful fisheries subsidies, including subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing and subsidies to vessels engaged in unregulated fishing.

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Audit Faults US Immigration Officials for Arresting, Deporting American Citizens

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US immigration officials arrested hundreds and deported dozens of American citizens in the past five years, believing they were illegal immigrants, the General Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Tuesday.

"Available data indicate ICE and CBP took enforcement actions against some U.S. citizens. For example, available ICE data indicate that ICE arrested 674, detained 121, and removed 70 potential US citizens from fiscal year 2015 through the second quarter of fiscal year 2020 (March 2020)," the report said.

GAO conducted an audit based on claims by US citizens that they were mistakenly identified as foreign nationals and detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or held by US Customs and Border Protection (CPB) on immigration charges, the report said.

Available ICE data also indicate the agency issued detainers for at least 895 potential US citizens during the five-year period and canceled about 74 percent of those detainers.

Detainers request that jailed individuals in the country illegally remain incarcerated beyond their release dates until federal agents arrive to begin deportation proceedings.

Problems identified in the report are due in part to inconsistent policies and procedures by both ICE and CBP officers for investigating citizenship claims, as well as a failure by ICE to systematically track encounters in which an individual's citizenship is in question.

Data collection is so poor that ICE does not know the extent to which its officers are taking enforcement actions against individuals who could be US citizens. By systematically collecting and maintaining electronic data, ICE would have better insight into its officers' enforcement of administrative immigration law, according to the report.

The report recommended that ICE update its training materials to reflect consistent procedures regarding potential US citizens, and systematically collect and maintain electronic data of encounters with individuals for whom there is evidence of potential US citizenship.

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Chinese Hackers Breached 13 US Gas Pipeline Firms From 2011 to 2013 - Cybersecurity Agency

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - State-sponsored Chinese hackers successfully breached 13 US natural gas pipeline operators from 2011 through 2013, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) announced on Tuesday.

"[T]he US government identified and tracked 23 US natural gas pipeline operators targeted from 2011 to 2013 in this spearphishing and intrusion campaign," CISA said in an advisory.

"[T]hirteen were confirmed compromises, three were near misses, and eight had an unknown depth of intrusion."

CISA said the US federal government had specifically attributed the attacks to state-sponsored forces backed by the Chinese government.

"The US government has attributed this activity to Chinese state-sponsored actors. CISA and the FBI assess that these actors were specifically targeting US pipeline infrastructure for the purpose of holding US pipeline infrastructure at risk," the advisory said.

CISA and the FBI assessed that the attacks were ultimately intended to help China develop cyberattack capabilities against US pipelines to physically damage pipelines or disrupt pipeline operations, the advisory added.

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Vaccinated Congressman, Several Staffers Contract Coronavirus - US Capitol Physician

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A member of US Congress and several staffers all of whom are vaccinated against the novel coronavirus have contracted the virus, Capitol Physician Brian Monahan said on Tuesday.

"Several vaccinated Congressional staffer members and one member of Congress have acquired infection," Monahan said in an email.

Monahan said the Delta variant of the coronavirus has been detected in Washington, DC, and in the Capitol buildings, and it presents a risk to people who are unvaccinated.

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US Eager to Work With Peru's President-Elect Castillo to Strengthen Relations - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is eager to work with Peru's newly elected President Pedro Castillo to strengthen bilateral relations and build a better future, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"On behalf of the United States, I congratulate the people of Peru for making their voices heard in free and fair presidential and legislative elections," Blinken said. "We are eager to work with President-elect Castillo's administration to strengthen the US-Peru relationship and move our nations toward a better future."

On Monday, Peru's election authority announced the final election results after reviewing claims of electoral fraud by right-wing candidate Keiko Fujimori. Castillo, a 51-year-old former rural school teacher and union leader, secured 50.1 percent of the vote.

Blinken said the United States commends the many officials, public servants and volunteers whose dedication made the vote and certification possible under challenging conditions.

"We look forward to the successful transfer of power to the new administration on July 28, 2021 - Peru's bicentennial," he said.

The United States and Peru shared interests in democracy, security, mutually beneficial trade and respect for human rights, and cooperation between the two countries had improved public health, livelihoods, security and environmental protections throughout the region, Blinken added.

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US Senators Introduce Bill to Limit President's Power to Use Military Force, Export Arms

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Senators Mike Lee, Bernie Sanders and Chris Murphy on Tuesday issued a release saying they have introduced bipartisan legislation that would limit

the president's national emergency powers, including the ability to unilaterally authorize use of military force and approve arms shipments to foreign countries.

"US Senator Chris Murphy, Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, US Senator Mike Lee and US Senator Bernie Sanders on Tuesday introduced bipartisan legislation to reclaim Congress's critical role in national security matters," the release said.

The National Security Powers Act would specifically give Congress the superior right to authorize use of military force, to approve arms exports, or to declare national emergencies, the release said.

The legislation would place a sunset on existing Authorization for Use of Military Force measures, the release said. It would also restrict funding for hostilities not approved by Congress and shorten the automatic "termination clock" from 60 days to 20 days, the release said.

In addition, the legislation would also require an affirmative vote from Congress to approve any US arms sales worth \$14 million or more.

The measure also gives Congress the power to decide whether to approve an emergency declaration within 30 days, the release said.

Moreover, the legislation would prohibit the use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose tariffs, the release added.

US Congressman James McGovern will introduce similar legislation in the House of Representatives in the coming weeks, according to the release.

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US Defense Chief, Jordan King Vow to Boost Cooperation on Regional Threats - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and King Abdullah II of Jordan committed to enhance collaboration in countering regional security concerns, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"Both leaders committed to strengthen the strategic partnership and to continue close cooperation to address regional security challenges," Kirby said in a readout of their meeting. Austin also emphasized the United States' steadfast support for the Jordanian Armed Forces, Kirby added.

On Monday, Abdullah met with President Joe Biden at the White House where the two leaders discussed security cooperation including US support for modernizing Jordan's fleet of F-16 fighter jets.

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US to Soon Announce Details of Deal With Germany on Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The White House expects the US State Department to provide more details on the reported Nord Stream 2 deal between Washington and Berlin, spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

On Monday, Reuters reported, citing sources familiar with the matter, that the United States and Germany were close to unveiling a deal that would avert resumption of currently waived US sanctions against Nord Stream 2 AG, the pipeline's parent company, and its Chief Executive Officer Matthias Warnig.

"I expect that the State Department, others will have more on this soon," Psaki said at a press briefing when asked to provide details of the US-German deal on Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

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Two Romanian Citizens Face Charges Over Online Auction Fraud - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States charged two Romanian nationals for operating fraudulent online auctions for luxury goods and stealing the identities of customers, the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"Costel Alecu, 37, of Bucharest, Romania, and Madalin Ghinea, 34, of Alexandria, Romania, are both charged in the indictment with one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud, eight counts of wire fraud, one count of conspiracy to traffic in counterfeit service marks, one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering and one count of aggravated identity theft," the Justice Department said in a press release.

From July 2008 through August 2020, Alecu, Ghinea and other members of their group devised a scheme to entice victims in the United States to purchase items online, including luxury goods that did not exist, and to obtain the personal identifying information of their victims, the release said.

Alecu and the other group members used the victims' identities to obtain credit cards and bank accounts to launder money and fund the operation of their network, the release added.

Alecu and Ghinea were arrested by Romanian authorities in March of 2021, according to the release.

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US Explores Designating Cuban Officials Over Recent Violence - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is working on sanctioning Cuban officials over the recent violence in their country and seeks to engage its international partners, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a briefing on Tuesday.

"At the President's direction, we are actively pursuing measures that support both the Cuban people and hold the Cuban regime accountable, and that has been the prism through which the President has made his decisions," Psaki said during a press briefing. "That includes working closely with the private sector and congress to identify viable options to make internet more accessible to the Cuban people. We are looking at options, there are a lot ideas out there." Psaki said the Biden administration is also looking to leverage the United States' international organization partners regarding humanitarian assistance flows to Cuba and work with them to voice concern and put public pressure on.

"The Treasury Department via the office of Foreign Assets Control will continue to explore designating Cuban officials responsible for violence, repression and human rights violation against peaceful protesters, and we'll form a remittance working group to identify the most effective way to get remittances directly into the hands of the Cuban people," she said.

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Harvey Weinstein Extradited to California to Face Additional Sex Crime Charges - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Movie producer Harvey Weinstein is being extradited to California from a prison in New York in order to face trial for additional sex crime charges there, NBC New York reported on Tuesday.

"This morning at approximately 9:25 custody of Mr. Harvey Weinstein was handed over to the appropriate officials for transport to the state of California per a court order," the report cited New York corrections officials as saying.

The New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision inmate database lists Weinstein as "out to court," meaning that he is no longer being held in the facility so as to participate in court elsewhere.

Weinstein is serving a 23-year prison sentence in New York after being found guilty on sexual assault and rape charges. He faces 11 more counts of sexual assault in Los Angeles County, California, in a case involving five women.

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Bezos Says Blue Origin Spacecraft to Fly 2 More Manned Missions in 2021

VAN HORN, July 20 (Sputnik) - Amazon founder Jeff Bezos announced on Tuesday that the Blue Origin spacecraft is going to fly two more manned missions to space in 2021 after completing successfully the first launch earlier in the day.

"We are going to fly human missions twice more this year. And what we do in the following year, I am not sure yet," Bezos said during a press conference after the flight.

Bezos also said that his high expectations about the space flight were "dramatically exceeded" as he was amazed by how beautiful the Earth is.

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US Army Launches 'Agile Spirit' War Exercises with Georgian Military Next Week - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US Army is launching an almost-two week-long military exercise called "Agile Spirit" with the Georgian military in the Caucasus starting next week, the European Command (EUCOM) in Stuttgart announced on Tuesday.

"Agile Spirit 2021 is a Georgian Defense Forces and US Army Europe and Africa cooperatively-led, joint multinational exercise occurring July 26 through Aug 6. The joint training promotes "Strength through Partnership," EUCOM said in a press release.

EUCOM explained the brigade-level exercise will incorporate a simulated command post exercise, field training and joint multinational, battalion-level combined arms live-fire exercises and is planned to enhance US, Georgian, allied and regional partner forces' readiness and interoperability.

Countries participating in the exercise include "Georgia, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Italy, and Azerbaijan. ... Of the military personnel, about 700 are US service members, around 1,600 are Georgian personnel," the release said.

This year for the first time the exercise will include a combined multinational airborne operation involving forces from Georgia, United Kingdom, and Poland while Special Operation Forces from Georgia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Romania and Poland will perform combined operations, the release added.

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Three Opioid Firms Pay Record \$1.1Bln in Settlement With New York - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US state of New York won its biggest settlement yet with drug companies over an opioid overdose epidemic, with three big distributors accepting a \$1.1 billion penalty, state Attorney General Letitia James said on Tuesday.

"As part of today's agreement, McKesson, Cardinal Health, and Amerisource Bergen will pay New York state a total of up to \$1,179,251,066.68, of which more than \$1 billion will go towards abatement. Payments will start in just two months and will continue over the course of the next 17 years," a press release explaining the settlement said.

The settlement comes amid media reports of a \$21 billion settlement with the three distributors of thousands of lawsuits by states, cities, counties and others. An additional \$5 billion would be

paid by drug maker Johnson & Johnson, in a nationwide settlement to be announced later this week.

Opioid overdoses claimed more than 500,000 lives in the past two decades, including nearly 70,000 in 2020.

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US Deploys New Technology to Scan Air Passengers - TSA Officials

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has introduced new, more advanced scanners and other technology to more effectively monitor airline passengers for concealed weapons, two senior officials told Congress on Tuesday. "Major technological advancements include Computed Tomography, or CT [which] produces high-quality 3-D images," TSA Executive Assistant Administrator for Security Operations Darby LaJoye and agency Executive Assistant Administrator for Law Enforcement Michael Ondocin said in prepared testimony.

The images can be rotated up to 360 degrees on three axes for a more thorough visual analysis of a carry-on bag's contents and they reduce the need to touch or manually check bags,"

LaJoye and Ondocin told the US House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security.

In addition, "new Credential Authentication Technology, or CAT, machines automatically verify five identification documents presented by passengers during the security screening process and confirm a passenger's flight information and vetting status without the need for our officers to see a boarding pass," the officials said.

As of early July, TSA has deployed 300 CT systems at 141 airports and four laboratories, as well as 1,053 CAT units at 119 airports and two laboratories, the officials added.

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Tikhanovskaya Says She Hopes to Meet With Biden Despite No Meeting Being Scheduled

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – Belarusian opposition leader and former presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said on Tuesday that he hopes to meet with US President Joe Biden during her stay in Washington, though no such meeting having been scheduled.

"We would like to meet with President Biden. It was not scheduled, but just maybe by chance we will be able to meet him," Tikhanovskaya said during conversation at the Atlantic Council think tank.

Tikhanovskaya expressed confidence that Biden is interested in Belarus and urged him to support the country.

"I am sure he knows the situation," she said.

Tikhanovskaya pointed out that during this visit to the United States, her delegation has been conducting a number of high-level meetings.

On Monday, Tikhanovskaya met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and is scheduled to meet with National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan as well as other officials.

In July 2019, the Russian Ministry of Justice designated the Atlantic Council as an undesirable organization on the territory of Russia, saying its activities pose a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order and security of the state.

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Assaults on Air Travel Security Officers Up 6 Times During Pandemic - TSA Officials

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Assaults on Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials rose six times per capita during the coronavirus pandemic, usually because of complaints about the enforcement of regulations to wear masks during flights, TSA agency officials told Congress on Tuesday.

"TSA has unfortunately seen an increase in unruly passengers at TSA checkpoints across the country and onboard aircraft," TSA Executive Assistant Administrator for Security Operations Darby LaJoye and agency Executive Assistant Administrator for Law Enforcement Michael Ondocin said in prepared testimony.

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been over 70 physical assaults on TSA officers and 3,600 in-flight disturbances," LaJoye and Ondocin told the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security.

Before the pandemic, in 2019, there were 1,230 in-flight disturbances, or two incidents per one million passengers screened, but as of early July 2021, there have been 2,838 in-flight incidents so far this year, or 12 incidents per one million passengers screened, the TSA officials said.

"This shows a dramatic increase in the number of incidents onboard aircraft, which occur for a variety of reasons, many of which are mask-related, frequently leading to agitated passengers who at times have become violent towards fellow passengers and the flight crew," LaJoye and Ondocin said.

Also, TSA continues to detect firearms on passengers and in carry-on bags at checkpoints at a higher rate, the officials warned.

"[A]s of early July, TSA detected 2,807 firearms in 2021, 85-percent of which were loaded," the officials said.

In 2020, TSA officers discovered a total of 3,257 firearms on passengers or in their carry-on bags at checkpoints, which was approximately ten firearms per million passengers screened, the officials added.

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US Coordinates With Canada, UK, EU New Economic Pressure on Belarus - Ambassador
WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is coordinating with its international partners, including the United Kingdom, European Union and Canada, new measures for economic pressure on Belarus, US ambassador in Minsk Julie Fisher said on Tuesday.

"With partners like the EU, United Kingdom and Canada, we continue to coordinate tools of economic pressure in support of the Belarusian people and to hold regime actors accountable for their abuses," Fisher said during the conversation with Belarus opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya at the Atlantic Council in Washington.

The United States is working with members of civil society, Belarusians in exile and like-minded governments in order to work a broad coalition on Belarus, she said.

Fisher pointed out that the United States is also actively working in international organizations, including the United Nations, to build a maximum pressure campaign against the Belarusian government.

In July 2019, the Russian Ministry of Justice designated the Atlantic Council as an undesirable organization on the territory of Russia, saying its activities pose a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order and security of the state.

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Biden's Pick for Senior Diplomatic Post Pledges More US Support for Ukraine - Testimony

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's nominee for US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Karen Donfried, said during her confirmation hearing on Tuesday that she would work with Congress to further United States' support for Ukraine. "I am grateful for the broad and bipartisan support there is on this committee for US support for Ukraine, and I read with great interest the act which has many interesting and important ideas captured in it, and if confirmed I would very much look forward to working with you on how we can increase our support for Ukraine," Donfried told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in response to a question about her opinion of the Ukraine Security Partnership Act.

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White House Official, Pelosi Staffer Test Positive for Coronavirus - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A White House official and a senior staff member for US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who had been both fully vaccinated have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the Axios website reported on Tuesday.

Both infected individuals experience mild symptoms after they attending the same reception atop the Hotel Eaton in Washington DC last Wednesday, the report said.

A fully-vaccinated senior spokesperson in the speaker's press office tested positive for the coronavirus on Monday after being in contact with members of the Texas state legislature last week, Pelosi's deputy Chief of Staff Drew Hammill was cited as saying in the report.

The Axios' source said that the Pelosi aide was with a group of Democratic lawmakers from Texas who fled to Washington, DC in an effort to sabotage the voting on the state's voting laws. Six of the lawmakers later tested positive for the coronavirus. Neither the White House official nor the Pelosi staff member have been in contact with President Joe Biden and Pelosi respectively, the report said.

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Biden Pick for Senior Diplomatic Post Vows to Fully Implement CAATSA Sanctions - Testimony

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's nominee for US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Karen Donfried, said during her confirmation hearing on Tuesday that she would work to fully implement the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to counter Russian "malign activities."
"I would absolutely agree with you that [CAATSA] has been important in pushing back against Russian influence and countering its malign activities, and if confirmed, I would indeed commit to the full implementation of CAATSA," Donfried told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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Tikhanovskaya Says She Hopes to Return to Belarus This Year

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who is currently visiting the United States, said on Tuesday that she expects to return to Belarus sometimes this year.
"I can't name you the date but [it will be] when I understand that I am more necessary in Belarus than in my job out of the country," Tikhanovskaya said during an Atlantic Council event. "But I hope that will happen this year."

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Coronavirus Delta Variant Now Represents 83% of 'Sequenced Cases' in US - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The Delta variant of the novel coronavirus has dramatically spiked in the United States and accounts for more than 80 percent of cases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Tuesday.

"CDC has released estimates of variance across the country and predicted the Delta variant now represents 83 percent of sequenced cases," Walensky told a US Senate hearing on the status of the coronavirus pandemic. "This is a dramatic increase, up from 50 percent for the week of July 3rd in some parts of the country."

Walensky said the rate of Delta variant's infections was even higher in areas of low vaccination rates in the United States.

"The best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 variance is to prevent the spread of disease and vaccination is the most powerful tool we have. We must continue vaccine coverage by building trust and confidence in COVID-19 vaccines," Walensky said.

Vaccines have been available to most Americans for months, but less than 50 percent of the population in the United States is fully vaccinated and the rate of new vaccinations is on the decline, according to the CDC.

In 47 of the 50 US states, the rate of new cases in the past week are at least 10 percent higher than the previous week, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. Of those, 35 states have seen increases in cases of more than 50 percent.

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US-Funded Climate Corps to Battle Global Warming With Green Jobs - Schumer

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Democrat lawmakers plan to include the Civilian Climate Corps (CCC) - a proposed government jobs program that borrows imagery from the Great Depression - as part of a massive \$3.5 trillion infrastructure package working its way through Congress, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday.

"I am using my power as majority leader to ensure that the Civilian Climate Corps will be included in the reconciliation package and I will fight to the biggest boldest CCC possible," Schumer said. "The goal of the Civilian Climate Corps program is to tackle climate change by creating good union jobs and to ensure a well trained workforce for long term careers."

The CCC would be part of an infrastructure package planned by Senate Democrats using budget reconciliation - a legislative maneuver that would bypass Republican objections.

Supporters in both chambers of Congress claim a CCC would create jobs for more than 1 million Americans over five years in federally funded projects that would help transition the US to a zero-emissions economy.

The proposal expands the concept of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which provided government funded jobs during the Great Depression of 1929, supporters say.

By including the CCC in the reconciliation package cited by Schumer, Democrats could avoid a filibuster by Senate Republicans, who claim the \$3.5 trillion plan would fuel inflation by adding trillions of dollars to spending previously approved to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures.

The Democrat plan would be in addition to a separate infrastructure package of about \$1 trillion that has bipartisan support in Congress.

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Bezos, Crew Safely Get Back to Earth After Reaching Edge of Space- Blue Origin Live Stream

VAN HORN, July 20 (Sputnik) - A spacecraft with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and a team of astronauts has successfully parachuted back on Earth at 8:23 a.m. CT (13:23 GMT) after it reached space with the New Shepard space missile, Blue Origin's live webcast of the launch showed on Tuesday.

The rocket came back on Earth first followed by the capsule carrying Bezos and the astronauts that parachuted in a Texas desert.

The duration of the flight from take off in Van Horn, Texas, until landing in the desert lasted nearly 11 minutes. The spacecraft reached the maximum speed of over 2,300 miles per hour before it started to descend from an altitude of about 66 miles.

Before starting to descend, the New Shepard missile detached from the capsule with Bezos and the astronauts and was first to arrive back to Earth.

The other crew members besides Jeff Bezos were his brother Mark Bezos, pilot Wally Funk and a Dutch teenager Oliver Daemen.

Bezos' unpiloted, automatic flight comes just nine days after another billionaire, Richard Branson, flew 60 miles above the stratosphere on his Virgin Galactic company's space plane Unity.